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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 005521

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: INDIAN WOMEN CONTINUE TO FACE OBSTACLES IN POLITICS

REF: NEW DELHI 5135

1. Summary: Despite an impressive list of accomplishments, including several current Chief Ministerships and presidency of the Congress party, Indian women continue to face cultural and practical barriers to their participation in politics. Female political leaders insist that greater women's participation is essential to ensure adequate treatment of issues such as health, education, food and water security, and children's welfare, as well as gender inequality in the workforce and insufficient attention to crimes against women and children. One million female local council (Panchayat) members demonstrate the competence of women as politicians, but women's representation in political parties, state assemblies, and national parliament remains modest. Parties continue to claim commitment to the Women's Reservation Bill, but Parliament is unlikely to pass it anytime soon. End Summary.

2. (U) Female Indian political experts discussed successes and challenges of Indian women in politics in a series of panels at a National Democratic Institute (NDI) workshop in New Delhi in June (Reftel). Topics discussed included cultural and practical obstacles faced by Indian women in politics, the current state of women in Indian political parties and elected bodies, and the prospects of the women's reservation bill. Panelists included leading experts from NGOs, political parties, academia, and the media.

#### Women's Involvement in Politics is Essential

3. (U) Indian panelists underscored the need for women to be involved in politics to ensure that so-called "women's issues" - health, education, food and water security, and children's welfare - will no longer be relegated to low priority. Rita Sarin, of the NGO The Hunger Project, emphasized that these issues are actually "human issues," and therefore cannot be ignored. Dr. Syeda Hameed, Planning Commission member, indicated that these are the "issues of the future." Panelists insisted that women must be included in the decision-making process on these and other political issues; they agreed that simply voting every five years does not constitute adequate political participation for women.

#### Women in Political Parties and Elected Bodies

4. (U) Despite the high profile examples of party leaders like Sonia Gandhi (Congress), Vasundhara Raje (BJP), and Mayawati (BSP), most women's participation in Indian political parties is reduced to administrative or campaign support. Several Indian women who have risen to powerful positions, including Indira and Sonia Gandhi and Chief Ministers Raje, Jayalalithaa, and Sheila Dikshit, have done so through the connections of their political families. Many parties tout their women's wings as evidence of their commitment to women, but these wings often serve as a way for the party to give lip service to women while keeping them out of the mainstream of the party leadership, activists argue. Several parties have policies reserving a certain percentage of their party leadership positions for women, but they have not fulfilled these promises.

5. (U) There are now approximately one million women in Panchayats (local councils), due to the constitutional reservation of 33 percent of the seats for women. The reserved seats rotate every five years. This constitutional mechanism has been a significant driver of increased political involvement for women. In many cases, women have been re-elected to their Panchayat position even after their seat was no longer reserved; in a few states, women's representation at the panchayat level is approaching 50 percent. Center for Social Research Director Ranjana Kumari noted that while women Panchayat members or leaders often begin as "fronts" for their husbands or male relatives, they often become empowered in their own right and are able to shed themselves of male family members' control. Veena Nayyar, of Women's Political Watch, estimated that one-third of the Panchayat women are ruling in their own right, one-third are essentially proxies of their husbands or other male relatives, and the remaining third are somewhere along the process of empowerment described by Kumari. Nayyar emphasized the need for these Panchayat women to convert their large numbers into real power.

## Obstacles Remain

16. (U) Neerja Chowdhury, Political Editor of the Indian Express, noted that women excel in every field in India, except in politics, where they have "hit a glass ceiling." She explained that Indian men oppose women in politics mainly because they fear changes in the power balance in the family, marketplace, and community. Kumari opined that when a society is more democratic, the state is more democratic. She predicted that when there is more equality for women in the family and community in India, there will be more female representation in government. She urged participants to bring this about by supporting economic and social empowerment of women to change family income balances. According to Benita Sharma of UNIFEM, Indian women elected to political office have begun to break stereotypes, but Indian men continue to cling to traditional gender roles and refuse to help out in the home.

17. (U) In addition to cultural obstacles, Indian women also face constraints of time, money, media access, and muscle power. Sharma explained that without more electricity, child care, and primary education, women would remain too busy working in the fields, obtaining food and water, and taking care of children to be involved in politics. Najma Heptullah, a parliamentarian who recently joined the BJP, noted that women entering politics are often unprepared to interact effectively with the media and need to cultivate the toughness required to face and take advantage of media exposure. She also explained that politics is dominated by money and muscle power, both of which women often lack, especially in Muslim areas. Sarin gave examples of elected women at the panchayat level being replaced by men under dubious circumstances, citing regulations saying that illiterate women or women with more than two children must vacate their seats. Another tactic is filing a no-confidence motion and then replacing the ousted woman with a man.

## Prospects Bleak for Women's Reservation Bill

18. (U) In state assemblies and in the national Parliament, representation of women has hovered around 8-9 percent for the past several years. The Women's Reservation Bill, which calls for reserving one-third of the seats in the Parliament and state assemblies for women, is a major goal of women political activists, including a majority of the panelists at the NDI workshop. First introduced in 1996, and re-introduced in 1998, 1999, and 2001, the bill faces stiff opposition from most male politicians across party lines. They have repeatedly blocked the bill either by voting it down or using parliamentary delay tactics.

19. (U) Panelists offered mixed opinions on the future of the Women's Reservation Bill. Those who are most active in lobbying for the bill, including Kumari and Rita Bahuguna Joshi, President of Congress' women's wing, were optimistic that it would pass in the upcoming Parliamentary session. Joshi pointed out that the bill is included in the UPA government's Common Minimum Programme and in the manifestos of several parties (including Congress, BJP, and the Left parties). Kumari noted the importance of media exposure and unity among women across party lines to cultivate support for the bill.

10. (SBU) Panelists with a more objective viewpoint, such as journalist Chowdhury, expect the bill to flounder once again due to lack of political will and the opposition of Congress' UPA partners. In a separate meeting with Poloff, G Devarajan of the All India Forward Bloc explained that if Congress had been sincere in its commitment to women's reservation, it would have already passed the bill. He also noted that Bihar's leading politician, Lalu Prasad Yadav, opposes the bill, and Congress will not do anything to offend Lalu in light of upcoming elections in Bihar.

## Comment

12. (U) Women continue to face an uphill battle in Indian politics due to traditional gender roles and lack of time, money, and political muscle. We do not expect the Women's Reservation Bill to pass anytime soon. However, there are other means by which Indian women can improve their lot. Efforts to improve women's social and economic empowerment - such as women's self-help groups, the recent anti-domestic violence bill, and educating women and girls - can have a multiplier effect that would do more for women than efforts to pursue the out-of-reach Women's Reservation Bill. The women elected to the Panchayats are demonstrating that women are capable of performing well in elected positions, and they have drawn many more Indian women into political life. In time, participation of women in local governance will give more women experience in political leadership and may lead to a wider acceptance of women in Indian politics.

13. (U) Bionotes on NDI Panelists:

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Kiran Bedi, Indian Police Service  
Neerja Chowdhury, Political Editor, Indian Express  
Rita Bahuguna Joshi, President, All India Mahila Congress  
Syeda Hameed, Member, Planning Commission, GOI  
Najma Heptullah, BJP Member, Rajya Sabha  
Ranjana Kumari, Director, Center for Social Research  
Veena Nayyar, President, Women's Political Watch  
Rita Sarin, Director, The Hunger Project  
Padma Seth, Former Member, National Commission for Women  
Benita Sharma, Program Officer, UNIFEM  
K P Vijaylaxmi, Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru  
University  
Girija Vyas, Chairperson, National Commission for Women

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